Urban Farming as a Tool to Grow the Community

By Alexander Brock

While backyard vegetable gardens have been a part of Atlanta residents’ lives for quite some time, a more recent movement toward urban farming has gained steam in the City of Atlanta. Urban farming is, as the name suggests, agricultural practices that utilize vacant lots within inner-city areas. While urban farms have made an appearance in Atlanta, widespread development was hindered by a zoning ordinance that did not allow agricultural uses. However, in June 2014 the Atlanta City Council passed Zoning resolution Z-14-05, which allows the creation of urban gardens and market gardens. By allowing residents to use lots as an agricultural use and markets to sell the produce, those wishing to obtain locally grown, fresh produce were finally given an outlet to do so.

However, urban farming has more implications than just a filling a niche for healthy food. It can be the impetus for community growth as well. Fortunately, the areas that can benefit the most from community growth are the areas that are ideal candidates for urban farming lots. Since urban farms require acreage that cannot be feasibly located in affluent markets, it is more likely that these urban farms will be located in economically depressed communities. These areas face many obstacles to growth, such as access to local markets and fostering a sense of community, that urban farming can help overcome.

In many poorer areas of Atlanta revitalization is hindered by what some planning experts refer to as a “food desert”, which is the lack of available grocery stores and farmers markets in a community. This food desert stalls economic development by detracting potential residents and investment in an area where availability to essential services are lacking. However, this stagnant development can be corrected through the introduction of market gardens, where local residents have access to locally grown produce, thus producing an oasis in an otherwise “food desert”. The introduction of this most basic community service could lead to the start of more investment and development in these neighborhoods.

Furthermore, urban farms and market gardens help foster a sense of community. As residents begin to frequent the local market garden for their weekly groceries, their sense of ownership in their communities may begin to grow. Whereas residents of food desert areas have to travel long distances outside of their community to get weekly groceries, a community with a market garden can walk down the street to get groceries in their own neighborhood. When residents start frequenting businesses within their own neighborhood they may begin to develop a connection with other residents who are customers of the community market garden. This shared shopping can help develop the needed community cohesion that it not found when residents have to travel to other neighborhoods to shop. Once the community starts developing bonds among its residents, then a sense of community ownership begins to form. It is this community ownership that is needed to bring about change in an otherwise stagnant neighborhood.

As a community develops a sense of ownership, it can lead a number of other positive changes including reinvestment in the community. So, by providing local access to groceries and creating a sense of community, urban farming can help spur growth in an otherwise stagnant community.
Alex Brock is a native of Roswell, GA and is currently working toward a Juris Doctor in Georgia State University’s part-time program. In addition to attending law school, Alex is employed full-time as a Project Manager at Core States Group overseeing the site design of commercial developments. He obtained his undergraduate degree in Civil Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and has a graduate degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Maryland. In addition to his education and work experience, Alex is a registered Professional Engineer in the State of Georgia and a LEED Accredited Professional. His goal is to use his background in engineering to complement his future legal career in environmental law. Alex joined the Urban Fellows program to become more involved in the environmental and land use issues affecting the Atlanta region.